

Low Back Pain? You're Not Alone.

NovaHealth 

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The good news is that most back problems get better over time — even without medical help. Caring for back problems typically involves controlling pain while doing other things to help your body heal itself. Fortunately, it's also unusual for back problems to become long lasting.

Here are some facts:

- More than 80% of all people will have troubling low back pain sometime.
- Most people get better no matter what treatment they receive.
- It's unlikely that any back problem will require surgery.
- Most people who have low back pain will not need x-rays or MRI scans.
- Most often, conditioning exercises, stretching, and good posture are the best long-term treatment for low back pain.

Low back pain is not an illness. Pain is a symptom — something you feel. Usually back pain is caused by minor problems — although genuinely painful, it's not usually due to a serious or dangerous condition.

Many factors can influence the health of the spine: exercise, fitness, posture, smoking, diet, work and play, injury or illness. Some people are just more prone than others to having back problems.

Given how much we use our spines every day, it's no wonder that back problems are so common.

Your physician's job is to help you understand the cause of these unpleasant sensations and, if necessary, offer the most effective treatment possible. This brochure can help you learn more about back pain and what to do about it.





The “Backbone”

The low back is a complex structure of bones, muscles, joints, discs, ligaments, and nerves. Back pain is often the result of irritation to one of these structures. Many minor episodes may well be simple muscle fatigue.

The spine serves three basic functions. It maintains the structure of the trunk as it allows for mobility. It protects the spinal cord, the main line of the nervous system. And it acts as the body’s shock absorber.

The bones or vertebrae, intervertebral discs, and ligaments provide the structure. Muscles support this structure, and joints provide mobility. The nervous system provides energy to and control of the body.

Why is my back bothering me?

The truth is, medical professionals can’t always tell why some people’s backs bother them. Sometimes a back problem gets better so fast, we never find out what was wrong.

Repetitive bending, twisting, and lifting may result in fatigue and tender back structures. Poor posture may irritate ligaments and discs. Some people with degenerative conditions in the low back develop symptoms from day-to-day stress that otherwise might not be a bother.

Nerves running through the spine and down into the pelvis and legs may become irritated or pinched causing pain or numbness in the back or the legs. Commonly known as “sciatica,” when this pain is constant or severe, it is of greater concern and should be fully evaluated by your physician.

Many common health conditions not related to the spine can result in back or leg symptoms. Hip arthritis, poor blood flow, or other medical problems may cause symptoms that are felt in the low back or legs. Your doctor will evaluate the history of your problem and your physical exam results to decide what might be involved and guide you toward further evaluation and treatment.

As we’ve said, serious spine problems are rare. Nevertheless, a fall or other accident followed by severe pain might indicate a broken bone. Severe weakness or numbness below your waist or loss of bowel or bladder control might indicate a serious nerve problem. Fever, sweats, extreme tiredness, weight loss, or other general body symptoms along with back pain could be related to an illness. Do not hesitate to report these possibly serious symptoms to your doctor.

There’s a difference between “spine damage” and “spine symptoms.” With age, we all get some wear-and-tear damage in our spines which is not always painful. Even more confusing, some people with spine symptoms do not have clear damage. Sometimes x-rays, MRI scans, or other tests reveal spine damage that has nothing to do with spine pain.

Spine symptoms may be very bothersome for a period of time, but only rarely are they serious. True, some people with long-term problems or very severe



pain need extensive evaluation before the reasons for their symptoms are discovered. But more often than not, the discomfort is temporary and the treatment is simple.

What can I do to help myself?

Although back pain can be incapacitating, there are several simple things that may help.

Ice/Heat

Cold or heat may help control some of your pain. Both work equally well; simply use whichever feels best for 15 minutes, three or four times a day. A plastic bag filled with crushed ice wrapped in a towel works well (do not place bare ice on your skin as this can cause frostbite). Electric heating pads are convenient. To avoid damaging your skin, never sleep on either heat or ice.

Limited rest

For intense pain, you may need to rest a day or two. Lying flat or reclined with your head and back supported may be most comfortable. Use either a firm or soft support — whichever feels better. Frequent changes in position seem to help many people.

However, too long in bed or on the couch will lead to a loss of fitness which can make things worse in the long run. Inactivity for longer than two days is rarely advised.

Stretching and Light Exercise

Most patients can tolerate light activity. Walking helps keep muscles loose and healing blood flowing to the troublesome parts of the back. Simple stretching exercises help maintain flexibility and make sore muscles feel better. It’s best to avoid running, jumping, and twisting activities as they may stress irritated spine structures. Similarly, it’s okay to stay at work if your job does not require heavy strain on the spine.

Limiting physically stressful work and maintaining good posture will quicken your recovery. There’s no evidence that light or moderate



Posture

Often a painful low back problem is the result of days or even years of joint and muscle strain due to poor posture or stressful living or working habits. This can be the result of any number of causes:

- Sitting in a slumped position at your desk or in a car for extended periods of time.
- Standing with insufficient muscle support for hours
- Holding your head in a forward position too much of the time can cause strain.

What happens is that permanent damage to back structures can result from stresses and strains due to poor posture.

General strengthening and flexibility exercises are helpful, but most importantly, you should learn to correct the posture that is causing the pain. Simply changing positions frequently can help significantly.



Lifting

Proper lifting is certainly one key to keeping your back injury free.

Remember, it's not really how much you lift or carry, but how you do it.

Here are some tips on using your body in the correct manner when lifting heavy objects.

When lifting:

- Keep your head high, chin tucked in and back in "power" position: knees and hips bent, head and shoulders up.
- Keep the inward curve of your back arched. This is the spine's natural shape.
- Keep weight close to your body and stand up straight.
- Maintain a wide, balanced stance as a base of support.

physical activity damages even irritated spines. The positive effect of maintaining muscle fitness and blood flow makes putting up with the mild pain of light activity well worth it.

Medications

Over-the-counter pain relievers or their generic equivalents such as Tylenol (acetaminophen), Advil (ibuprofen), and Aleve (naproxen sodium) are good choices for most people. Be sure to read and follow the directions carefully.

For consistent pain, it's best to take these medications on a regular schedule — not just when the pain is severe. (Do not take these medications without first checking with your doctor if you have kidney or liver disease, stomach problems, or difficulties with bleeding, or if you are pregnant.)

In unusual cases, stronger medicines including narcotics, oral steroids, and sedatives may be used over short periods of time. Long-term use of any medication should only follow discussions with your primary care physician.

Overall health improvements

Better health habits such as quitting smoking, watching your weight, and regular exercise may help limit flare-ups of back pain and prevent future episodes.

What happens if my back problem doesn't go away?

If you've tried the basic recommendations discussed above and have not gotten better, it may be time to look more carefully at why your back continues to give you trouble. Work with your primary care doctor to be sure you have a thorough evaluation. Reassurance that there is no serious problem is the first step.

A different trial of medication or a short course of physical therapy may be the best next step. Your doctor will help decide if seeing a specialist is a good idea.



Do I need tests for my back problem?

Complicated evaluations, arranged by your primary care physician, are not usually needed. There is no "perfect" test to tell exactly what's causing all prolonged back complaints. Understanding your back requires careful consideration of test results along with the history of the problem and your physical exam. Tests that might be ordered include:

X-rays: Simple x-rays can detect serious bone, joint, or alignment problems in the low back and sometimes indicate disc damage. Many people have unrelated abnormalities on x-rays so findings can be misleading.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) Scan: This very detailed, expensive test shows back structures including disc damage and nerve compression due to arthritis or a herniated disc. It can detect unusual causes such as infections. An MRI may also find minor abnormalities that have nothing to do with your problem and create confusion. This test is not commonly needed.

Other Imaging Tests: Bone scans and CAT scans help detect problems with the spine's bone structures. Bone scans can identify fractures or bone breaks. CAT scans show bone structure in detail and may be used instead of an MRI in certain circumstances. Another test, a myelogram, involves a dye injection in the spine combined with a CAT scan to search for nerve problems not always seen with an MRI. These tests are also not commonly needed.

Blood Tests: These can detect certain types of arthritis, infections, or other medical problems that can affect the spine or cause spinal pain, although they are not typically needed to evaluate spine problems.

Spinal Injections: Guided by x-ray and placed accurately on certain parts of the spine, special injections may help pinpoint pain sources or deliver medications to treat specific areas of the spine.



Stretching

Joint stiffness and loss of flexibility is a common cause of neck and back pain. So flexibility exercises are important. As a general rule, if you have limited movement and some stiffness is felt at the end of the movement, flexibility exercises are probably a smart way to start treatment.

There are dozens of different stretching exercises, and each affects a specific group of muscles, tendons, and ligaments. You should discuss which exercises are best for you with your doctor or physical therapist.

Keep in mind that there is such a thing as being "too flexible." Joints and muscles can be overstretched. Proper stretching should not hurt. You should stretch only to the point where you feel a gentle pull on your muscles and ligaments — but not pain.



Exercise

Well balanced, muscular strength is a key ingredient to good posture and a healthy back. For strengthening exercises to be effective, the muscles must become fatigued while exercising. This increased work load causes the muscles to grow stronger. If your muscles are weak, basic light exercise will help strengthen the muscles. However, as you grow stronger, more repetition or resistance must be added to work the muscles hard enough to make them grow stronger.

Generally speaking, exercises utilizing heavy resistance and few repetitions build power, or muscle bulk, while exercising with mild resistance and greater repetitions builds endurance.

If you are taking up strenuous exercise activity after a long stretch of inactivity, it is always best to start with short, light exercise sessions in order to avoid injuries due to overexertion. Talk with your doctor or physical therapist about designing an exercise program tailored to your needs.

Electromyography (EMG) and Nerve Conduction Studies:

This is a specialized...

Who should I see for my back problem?

You can understand how complex evaluating, diagnosing, and treating low back pain can be. And how many different health professionals can get involved. You may work with several people including:

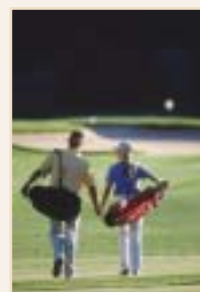
Primary Care Physician: Our medical team has developed an integrated approach in which your primary care physician (PCP) coordinates your care and refers you to specialists who can help. Meeting with your PCP is always the first step to recovery and often the only step you may need to take.

Physical Therapist: A physical therapist (PT) does the “hands on” work of evaluating and treating your spine with manipulation, massage, stretching, exercise instruction, postural awareness, electrical stimulations, or other heat/cold modalities. Your PT may recommend a specific exercise and stretching program and help you find ways of doing the program at home or at a local gym.

Physiatrists: Also called physical medicine specialists, these doctors focus on diagnosing difficult musculoskeletal and neurological problems and use a number of treatment techniques including injections, manipulation, or nerve testing. They prescribe medications and may help with physical therapy or special braces. They coordinate your care with other specialists if needed.

Neurologists: These physicians have special training in the evaluation and treatment of the nervous system. Like other physicians, they use MRI or CAT scans and nerve testing to help diagnose common low back nerve problems, and like physiatrists, they evaluate and treat common spine conditions.

Chiropractors: Chiropractors use special manipulation techniques after



evaluation that often includes x-ray studies. They also employ ultrasound, heat or massage, may order advanced tests, and often recommend exercises. They do not prescribe drugs but may recommend herbal or food supplements.

Osteopathic Physicians: These medical doctors may have training in primary care or a specialty such as psychiatry or neurology. They differ in that special osteopathic manipulation techniques are usually a part of treatment. They may prescribe drugs, special tests, or perform injections.

Orthopedic or Neurosurgeons: These medical physicians have surgical training for more difficult spinal problems. Both treat common spinal problems such as herniated discs or pinched nerves and perform bone fusion operations. Orthopedic surgeons have particular expertise in bone related disorders such as fractures. Neurosurgeons focus more on complicated nerve conditions. Fortunately, the typical spinal problem rarely requires surgery.

If it helps at all, we're here to help.

We hope after reading this brochure you feel better about your back problem. You now know that most low back pain problems get better with or without medical help. You know that, with some basic care, you can manage much of this process on your own. Quite often, the best approach is simply to have patience and let your body's natural healing ability go to work on solving the problem. Rest, over-the-counter pain relievers, ice packs or heating pads, light stretching or exercise — these are the best initial steps in caring for your back.

If you feel the problem is too difficult to manage alone, your primary care doctor and our entire integrated team are there to help. Report any serious pain or other symptoms immediately. If the problem is very bothersome, further physician evaluation may lead you down the road to recovery.

Remember, our goal is to work together with you to help you lead a full, active life with as little discomfort and as much function as possible.



Healing

The good news is that most back injuries get better with time whether or not you see a physician or undergo treatment.

There are many things you can do to aid the healing process and prevent future injuries. Here are just a few tips:

- Good shoes are essential.
- Swimming is one of the best exercises for your back if done regularly.
- Practice good posture and proper body mechanics.
- Good nutrition is essential for good health. Excess weight causes increased wear and tear on the joints and muscles and can cause bad posture.
- Manage your stress. Flare-ups of back pain frequently occur at the peak or just after periods of increased tension.
- Regular, adequate rest is important to maintaining good health.
- Stop smoking. Recent clinical studies have shown a direct relationship between cigarette smoking and back problems.

Your overall, total wellness affects not only your back, but also your health in general.

Other Sources of Information Regarding the Treatment of Low Back Pain

Healing Back Pain Naturally by Arthur H. Brownstein, MD (Harbor Press Inc., Gig Harbor, WA / February, 1999)

How To Manage Pain Before It Manages You by Margaret A. Caudill, MD (Guilford Publications Inc. / December, 1994)

Treat Your Own Back by Robin A. McKenzie, (Spinal Publications Ltd., 1985)

Low Back Pain: A Symptom-Based Approach to Diagnosis and Treatment
by Andrew J. Cole, Karen S. Rucker, and Stuart M. Weinstein (Butterworth-Heinemann / September, 2000)

Web sites: www.spineuniverse.com, www.spineuniversity.com,
www.apta.org/consumer (American Physical Therapy Association)

This brochure is intended for informational purposes only, and the information contained herein does not constitute medical advice. The content is not intended to diagnose, treat, or provide a second opinion on a health problem or disease. In addition, the references above are sources we have found useful in communicating with patients regarding low back pain. We make no warranties or representations as to the timeliness, accuracy, completeness, or adequacy of the information contained in or linked to these references or Web sites.

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